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ABSTRACT

A study analyzed statistically the monotony of all-news radio listening and identified stylistic figures that elicit attention in listeners. Subjects were 30 graduate students whose experience with radio news ranged from occasional listening over several months to regular listening five or seven days per week for several years. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four groups, each of which listened to one of two 30-minute spans of an all news station in an informal "coffee-and-doughnuts" setting. After listening, each participant was isolated in a cubicle with two tape recorders, one of which ran continuously. As the other replayed the broadcast, the subject identified content items and stylistic figures that had elicited attention in the initial listening and rated these elements on a nine-point scale. The similarity of patterns of attention to the two newswheel spans indicated the monotony of all-news listening. While statistical comparison of how relatively few auditors listened to two segments of programming can only be suggestive, it bolsters the impressions of casual monitoring, the findings of content analysis, and the extratextual evidence of all-news programmers' descriptions of the newswheel format. The statistical findings were particularly interesting because they objectively reflect listeners' experience of radio news as familiar and predictable--that is, monotonous. Change in newsroom voice and intonation variables also influenced listeners' attention. (HTH)

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LISTENING TO MONOTONY: ALL-NEWS RADIO

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed statistically the monotony of all-news radio listening and identified stylistic figures which elicit attention. Discussion suggests reasons for newsradio's ritualistic appeal and impact.

LISTENING TO MONOTONY: ALL-NEWS RADIO

Gordon McLendon, the pioneer of format radio whose XTRA (Tiajuana) first broadcast all-news (to southern California listeners) in 1961, said of newsradio:

> To the extent that an all-news station is monotonous, it will succeed. To the extent that is not, it will fail.[1]

That a form of discourse appeals because it is monotonous seems extraordinary. This study assesses newsradio's monotony, identifies stylistic formulae (e.g., sound effects and music beds, changes in vocal tone or rate of delivery) which elicit attention, and discusses the value and impact of all-news radio beyond its obvious informative, journalistic function. The study's conclusions are based on statistical analysis of listeners' scale-ratings of their attention rather than on the traditional critical evidence of exemplification and speculation.

Programming at McLendon's WNUS (Chicago), which offered all-news from 1965 to 1968, strikingly illustrates the philosophy of the genre's founder:

> ...ninety-six fifteen-minute newscasts round the clock.... There are no features, no celebrity interviews, no news analysis...the news comes as straight as the twelve news wires used by WNUS can make it....

> and the newsmen are expressly forbidden to re-write....
>
> The cumulative effect of this is just what the boss asked for--unadulterated monotony.[2]

Although McLendon believed that profitability could not be maintained if all-news stations became independent newsgathering operations, his commitment to monotony was, just as much, a matter of conviction: "The all-news station,..., is a service, like the telephone time and weather service."[3]

Programming at today's second-generation newsradio stations, such as WINS (New York), KYW (Philadelphia) and KCBS (San Francisco), is more expansive than that of McLendon's rip-and-read operations, calling for "editors and writers...[and] actuality."[4] But modern all-news programming is still cyclic and formulaic--in short, monotonous--governed by the "newswheel"[5] concept (at Group W stations) or a very similar "dartboard principle"[6] (at CBS outlets), in which updated stories fill a standard, repeating pie-chart format whose slices are dedicated to various types of content. McLendon's tightly structured format remains the controlling paradigm, as the following anatomy of a typical hour on WINS shows:

> Twenty-four different news stories, 5 features, 14 weather/temperature report, 21 headlines, 16 time checks; 11 minutes of sports, 17 minutes of commercials. Of the 24 news stories: 9 local, 10 national, 5 international.[7]

The success of all-news stations both testifies to the growing appeal of specialized media services and validates McLendon's claim for newsradio's monotony. Although all-news outlets are relatively few in

number, they are heard by very large audiences in the largest broadcast markets. Such stations need very large editorial staffs and elaborate newsgathering facilities, but, once established, they generate healthy profits: for example, roughly 15% for KCBS,[8] about 18-20% for KYW.[9] Rather than attempting to hide or deny the repetitious monotony which McLendon saw as the basis for their success, all-news stations tout it as their most potent selling point: "Give us 22 minutes and we'll give you the world."[10]

As this promotional pitch suggests, and both casual listening and content analysis confirm, newsradio programming is monotonous because it is cyclically repetitive and therefore expectable. Stylistic figures (sound beds and effects, lexical formulae such as "KYW news-time is...", etc.) are signposts of the various types of content which fill successive newswheel slots. In Formalist/Structuralist terms, these figures are instances of "foregrounding:"[11] "the use of the devices of language in such a way that this use itself attracts attention."[12] Foregrounding in aesthetic works "deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects,"[13] and thus promotes defamiliarization, the technique by which art "shock[s] us out of the anaesthetic grip our language maintains on our perceptions."[14] But as "an accompaniment of the practical attitude"[15] of newsradio listeners, foregrounding works in "the service of communication:"[16]

> Foregrounding is...common...<u>in journalistic style,</u>
> ...But here it is always subordinate to communication:
> <u>its purpose is to attract the reader's (listener's) attention more closely to the subject matter expressed by the foregrounded means of expression</u>.[17]

The redundancy and stylistic strategies of the all-news format fit newsradio's customary role as a background accompaniment to other activities. Its foregrounded devices are invitations to attend to associated types of content. Listeners respond to these stylistic inducements selectively, in accordance with their particular interests. Newsradio's monotony thus permits listening with "the greatest economy of perceptive effort."[18] This study's research question is: What are the salient stylistic devices of newsradio which tend to bring the monotonous flow of its programming to the forefront of auditors' attention?

METHOD

Respondents

Participants were 30 graduate students whose experience with newsradio ranged from occasional listening over several months to regular five or seven days per week listening for several years. The sample included 16 males (53.3 percent) and 14 females (46.7 percent) to approximate the 52.7 percent male-47.3 percent female audience of KYW,[19] whose programming was used in the study and whose listenership is typical of large-market all-news stations.

The study is in some senses a pilot project. The small sample n was dictated by limitations on data collection facilities. Since newsradio is not available in the community where the research was conducted, respondents were former rather than current listeners to various all-news stations. The graduate student-subjects' mean age was 26.3 years, whereas the mean age of KYW listeners is about 44 years.[20] While the KYW audience is about three-quarters white and one-quarter black,[21] all 30 of this study's subjects are white. About half of the

KYW audience has no more than a high school education.[22] Both this study's participants and the KYW audience tuned in to newsradio about twice a day.[23] The median listening span per tune-in for these subjects was 21.8 minutes, as opposed to 32.2 minutes for KYW listeners.[24] The study's theoretic point of view and innovative methodology are sufficiently interesting and promising to motivate and justify the work in spite of the inperfections of the sample.

Procedure

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four groups of seven or eight subjects. Each group listened to one of two 30-minute spans of KYW all-news programming in an informal "coffee-and-doughnuts" situation. This arrangement was intended to simulate the casual character of actual newsradio listening while insuring some uniformity of exposure. After listening, each participant was isolated in a cubicle with two tape recorders. One recorder ran continuously. As the other replayed the broadcast previously listened to, the subject paused the tape to identify both content items and stylistic figures which had elicited attention in the initial listening and to rate these elements on a 1-9 (least-greatest) interest scale.

Instrumentation

The broadcast texts aired on KYW from 7:55 to 8:25 A.M. on Friday, March 19 and Friday, March 26, 1982. Since it was infeasible to collect data in KYW's service area, the programming was taped and presented about 24 hours after airtime. Respondents were directed to avoid media news during that period to minimize sensitization to content.

Use of two spans of programming lessens the degree to which responses might reflect the particular content of one broadcast or the changing content of several rather than the generic structure and

style of the newswheel. Since "morning drivetime is the peak period of audience interest,"[25] its programming probably embodies a relatively pure or strong articulation of the all-news format. The 30-minute length of the texts approximates listeners' average tune-in time.[26] The texts begin a bit before the start of KYW's 60-minute newswheel in order to strike a balance between realistic listening and the experimental aim of confronting respondents with newswheel structure and stylistic features.

Each of two assistants trained by the author coded 15 subjects' taped responses to stylistic elements. (Nine types of foregrounded stylistic figures emerged; see Table 1). Six tapes (20 percent of the sample) were coded by both assistants. Intercoder reliability was assessed with with Cohen's Kappa, a coefficient of agreement for nominal data which is conceptually analogous to a correlation coefficient.[27] Cohen's K for the six tapes coded by both assistants is .91. Since "values greater than .75 or so may be taken to represent excellent agreement beyond chance,"[28] intercoder reliability is satisfactory.

RESULTS

The Pattern of Attention

For each of the two broadcasts, respondents' ratings of interest in both content items and stylistic features were summed in each 15-second interval. These summed ratings were plotted against the broadcasts' running times. The Pearson correlation coefficient for the two broadcasts' attention curves (.22;N=120), indicates that they are significantly correlated (p=.017).

Response to Style

Participants' ratings of stylistic elements were factor analyzed (R-type, principle factor solution, varimax rotation) on the nine types

of stylistic strategies into which they were coded. The four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 which emerged form a structure which seems to fit the data well (Table 1). Items with loadings of at least .40 on one factor and less than .25 on any other were accepted. Because

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TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

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two of Table 1's factors have only single variables and because one other variable does not load on any factor, factor analyses yielding two- and three-factor solutions for the other six intercorrelated factors were done to see how their roles in Table 1's factor structure might be conditioned by the uncorrelated variables. The two-factor solution replicates Table 1's factors 1 and 3. The three-factor solution splits off the voice actuality variable from the others of factor 3, a refinement which adds to Table 1's information but does not call into question the table's factor structure in any important way. Hence Table 1's four-factor structure was accepted as a reasonably robust and stable picture of the dimensionality of newsradio's stylistic strategies. (It is not surprising that refining the factor structure should isolate a variable that involves change of voice since the on-air voice is the focus of attention in the aural field of all-news listening.)

DISCUSSION

Newsradio's Monotony

The similarity of patterns of attention to the two newswheel spans indicates the monotony of all-news listening. While statistical comparison of how relatively few auditors listened to two segments of

programming can only be suggestive, it bolsters the impressions of casual monitoring, the findings of content analysis and the extratextual evidence of all-news programmers' descriptions of the newswheel format. The statistical findings are particularly interesting because they objectively reflect listeners' experience of newsradio as familiar and expectable--i.e., monotonous.

Newsradio Style

Table 1's first factor seems to tap the metrics of all-news speech. The fact that subjects responded similarly to music and change in rate of delivery suggests that it is the metrical aspect of music which caught their notice and implies that this factor represents variability in attention induced by patterns and changes in rhythm. Factor 2 embodies a complementary constitutive dimension of streams of sound: frequency or pitch. Since it is the on-air voice which is prominent in newsradio, the term "intonation" is synonymous.

Factor 3 is labelled "Vocal Substance" because its items share a quality of distinctiveness of vocal material Lexical selection (i.e., unusual diction), voice and sound actualities and special effects (e.g., KYW's characteristic teletype sound bed, time tones, etc.) all provide particularly striking moments in the broadcasts since they are departures from the flow of the on-air voice.

The effects on attention of changes of that voice--changes between co-anchors' or team broadcasters' voices, as opposed to the changes between newsroom and actuality voices of factor 3--underlie Table 1's fourth factor. As the familiar, enduring vehicle of all-news programming, the newsroom voice embodies the "syntagmatic"[29] (sequential) flow of newsradio. The "Change of newsroom voice" and "Intonation" variables are especially conspicuous in Table 1. Their isolation on their own

factors and the magnitude of their loadings reflect their independence and salience in influencing listeners' attention.

Comments on Method

This study focuses on how an all-news listener "organizes the text...[in an] act of achieving signification."[30] By looking at newsradio listening rather than all-news programming per se, the study goes beyond text-bound approaches which "virtually ignore the sign" while "concentrat[ing] instead on the features of the signal."[31] The study's phenomenological view reflects the Structuralist tenent that "Structure, function and sign are complementary notions interwoven into a cohesive system,"[32] and the "pragmatic"[33] approach of Kenneth Burke: "to guide our observations about the form itself, we seek to discover the functions which the structure serves."[34]

The techniques used here also emphasize the processual nature of communication in the spirit of Brooks and Scheidel's "Speech as Process: A Case Study."[35] They repeatedly interrupted a taped presentation to have subjects fill out rating scales of perceived speaker attributes. The articulation of listeners' impressions which they discovered was invisible to simple pre- and post-test measures.

Although less obtrusive data collection techniques are needed, Brooks and Scheidel found "internal measurements" to be "a practical method of inquiry" which produced "little disruptive effect:"[36] "While...interruptions are exceptional, they need not generate abnormal responses."[37] A concern with the phenomenal, experienced text is common to their work and to this study. Such an approach may "bring phenomenological criticism into the domain of Formalism and Structuralism"[38] by encoding and analyzing "behavioral and phenomenological responses"[39] to material texts. Computer analysis can add statistical evidence to the

speculation and confirming examples which traditionally support critical claims about the impact of texts.

Newsradio's Appeal and Impact

A Marxist view of all-news radio would see listeners as driven by the need to assuage bourgeois anxiety with "constant surveillance,"[40] and as duped by the emotional gratification of "not really news but essentially trivia...that does not deal seriously with our social and political problems but that instead diverts and entertains us."[41] Whether a Marxist critique is warranted, the idea that newsradio listening is an emotional ritual in the guise of information-seeking behavior seems apt. Listening is a structured, familiar--monotonous--activity which, like ritual, is valued for its own sake (though this is not consciously appreciated) and is motivated by the appeal of form itself. As Kenneth Burke wrote, the "symmetry" of form has "'universal' appeal" which induces "the auditor to participate in the form."[42]

The newswheel's formulae of structure and style encourage "habitual" and "automatic" listening with "the greatest economy of perceptive effort."[43] This is the opposite of aesthetic experience. Art shows that reality always exceeds the grasp of categorization, but newsradio literally anaesthetizes listeners by couching the news in familiar linguistic forms which subtly stabilize and reinforce their established views of worldly affairs. It is the role and importance of this anaesthetic function in maintaining individual identity and social coherence which underlie McLendon's claim for newsradio: "To the extent that an all-news station is monotonous, it will succeed."[44]

NOTES

[1] Gordon McLendon cited by Jack Williams, "All News All the Time," Quill March 1978: 22. XTRA was preceded by RADIO CLOCK (Havana), which broadcast one-minute newscasts and weather and time announcements in 1947 (Williams 22), and by KFAX (San Francisco) which offered extended agenda coverage in 1959 (Ron Powers and Jerrold Oppenheim, "The Failed Promise of All-News Radio," Columbia Journalism Review Sept./Oct. 1973: 25). But it is McLendon's XTRA which inspired all-news programming by Group W and CBS, whose outlets have come to dominate the field (Powers and Oppenheim 25).

[2] Jack Altman, "Local Radio: All-news Sound: WNUS Chicago," Columbia Journalism Review Summer 1965: 23-24.

[3] "McLendon wary of WINS tests," Broadcasting 19 April 1965: 76.

[4] Richard Pack cited by Williams 23.

[5] Powers and Oppenheim 24.

[6] Stephen Knoll, "Choice of Two in All-news," Variety 4 Dec. 1968: 35, 49; "The All-News Way of Radio Journalism," Broadcasting 6 Jan. 1975: 38.

[7] Jack Williams, "One Day in the Life of an All-news Editor," Quill March 1978: 24.

[8] Ben H. Bagdikian, "Fires, Sex, and Freaks," American Mass Media: Industries and Issues, eds. Robert Atwan, Barry Orton, and William Vesterman (New York: Random House, 1978) 275.

[9] Richard Shapiro, acting general manager, KYW (Philidelphia), personal communication, 17 Aug. 1981.

[10] A 1981 television spot for WINS (New York).

[11] Paul L. Garvin, ed. and trans., A Prague School Reader on Ethetics, Literary Structure, and Style (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown UP, 1964) viii.

[12] Bohuslav Havranek, The Functional Differentiation of the Standard Language," in Garvin 10.

[13] Roman Jakobson, "Closing statement: linguistics and poetics, "Style in Language, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology P, 1960) 356.

[14] Terence Hawkes, Structuralism & Semiotics (Berkley: U of California P, 1977) 70.

[15] Jan Mukarovsky, "The Esthetics of Language," in Garvin 33.

[16] Mukarovsky 19.

[17] Mukarovsky 10; emphasis supplied.

[18] Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays, ed. and trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1965) 12.

[19] Arbitron Radio: Audience Estimates in the Arbitron Market of Philadelphia (Jan/Feb 1979) (Beltsville, The Arbitron Co., 1979).

[20] Michael Woal, "The Uses of All-News Radio: How and Why the KYW (Philadelphia) Audience Listens," Masters thesis, Temple U, 1980, 89.

[21] Woal 89.

[22] Woal 92.

[23] Woal 103.

[24] Woal 101.

[25] Don J. Brewer, "All-News Programming," Broadcast Programming: Strategies for Winning Television and Radio Audiences, eds. Susan Tyler Eastman, Sydney W. Head, and Lewis Klein (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1981) 295.

[26] Frank Oxarart, general manager, KYW (Philadelphia) personal communication, 19 Nov. 1975.

[27] Jacob Cohen, "A Coefficient of Agreement for Nominal Scales," Educational and Psychological Measurement 20 (1960): 37-46.

[28] Joseph L. Fleiss, Statistical Methods for Rates and Proportions, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1981) 218.

[29] Hawkes 26; emphasis deleted.

[30] Susan Wittig, "The Computer and the Concept of Text," Computers and the Humanities 11 (1977): 214.

[31] Wittig 214; emphases in original.

[32] Peter Steiner, "The Conceptual Basis of Prague Structuralism," SOUND, SIGN AND MEANING: Quinquagenary of the Prague Linguistic Circle, Michigan Slavic Contributions No. 6 (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1978) 377.

[33] Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973) 89.

[34] Burke 101; emphasis in original.

[35] Robert D. Brooks and Thomas M. Scheidel, "Speech as Process: A Case Study," Speech Monographs 35 (1968): 1-7.

[36] Brooks and Scheidel 5.

[37] Brooks and Scheidel 5.

[38] John B. Smith, "Computer Criticism," Style 12 (1978): 351.

[39] John B. Smith, "RATSALL: A Language Analysis Computer System for the Eighties," Style 14 (1980): 389.

[40] Arthur Asa Berger, Media Analysis Techniques (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1982) 148.

[41] Berger 149.

[42] Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969) 58-59.

[43] Shklovsky 12.

[44] McLendon cited by Williams, "All News All the Time" 22.

TABLE 1

FACTOR ANALYSIS OF ALL-NEWS RADIO STYLE[a]

Aspect of Style[b]	Factor[c]	Factor Loading
	1. Rhythm (Eigenvalue = 2.00; percent of variance explained = 22.2)	
Music		.56
Change in rate of delivery		.78
	2. Pitch (Eigenvalue = 1.66; percent of variance explained = 18.5)	
Intonation		.97
	3. Vocal Substance (Eigenvalue = 1.25; percent of variance explained = 13.9)	
Voice actuality		.58
Lexical selection		.45
Effects		.41
Sound actuality		.41
	4. Newsroom Voice (Eigenvalue = 1.03; percent of variance explained = 11.4)	
Change of newsroom voice		.88

[a] N=30.

[b] One aspect of style--"humorous tone"--did not achieve a loading of .40 or greater.

[c] Percent of total variance explained by the four factors = 66.0.